# Remote Learning Community: Supporting Teacher Educators During Unprecedented Times

FARSHID SAFI, TAYLAR WENZEL,
AND LEE-ANNE TRIMBLE SPALDING
*University of Central Florida, USA*
farshid.safi@ucf.edu
taylar.wenzel@ucf.edu
spalding@ucf.edu

This paper outlines a collaborative effort to respond and support the instructional needs and concerns of teacher educators due to the challenges posed by the sudden onset of emergency remote teaching at the university level. The School of Teacher Education members formed a synergistic Remote Learning Community, developed an action plan and implemented resources including a Pop-In Mini-Conference to facilitate and address the immediate pedagogical and instructional needs to address the teaching of 600+ courses servicing over 7,500 students. The process described led to outcomes that can address and enhance future considerations related to professional learning and teacher preparation.

## INTRODUCTION & RATIONALE

The shift to online teaching in response to COVID-19 was abrupt. While the phrase "remote teaching" was widely used to describe this instructional pivot, experts coined the phrase "emergency remote teaching" to more accurately depict the associated realities and challenges (Lederman, 2020, para. 10; Milman, 2020, para. 3). A large body of research on the significance of online teaching in teacher preparation exists (Parrish & Sadera, 2019;

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology, 2016), yet apprehension of technology adoption among faculty with self-reported online teaching anxiety persists (Johnson, Wisniewski, Kuhlmeyer, Isaacs, & Krzykowski, 2012). Tasks of designing/delivering online instruction and adopting new technology platforms are identified as significant barriers (Borthwick & Hansen, 2017). In our School of Teacher Education, campus closure required the conversion of 665 courses with over 7,500 students to emergency remote teaching with new webinar platforms and tools in just 5 days.

Beyond university-sponsored professional development, faculty leaned on one another for content-specific ideas. The School of Teacher Education (STE) Remote Learning Community (RLC) https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IUe-6fSZdRp0dPQjd06Hq90FSSbTSQn0/view — a collaborative support network — was born through a bottom-up approach to address challenges in emergency remote teaching for teacher educators.

## PROCESS
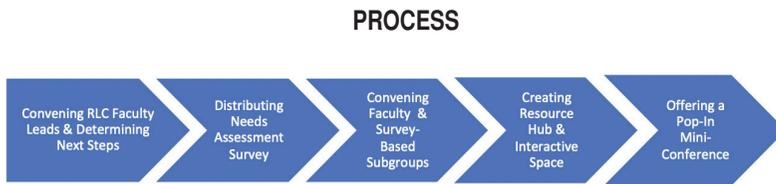


**Figure 1.** Remote Learning Community Origination and Faculty Professional Development Efforts.

### Convening RLC Faculty Leads and Determining Next Steps

The Remote Learning Committee (RLC) was initiated by eight faculty and staff leads who expressed interest in providing support during emergency remote teaching. These faculty members not only wanted to provide support but needed a community to learn with and from during the pandemic. RLC members met weekly to biweekly via Zoom to develop goals to frame our work, outline tasks and accomplishments, and prepare for support measures in need of implementation, including unexpected challenges that emerged from week to week. The first task identified was to design a survey to identify specific areas of need and support.

### Distributing Needs Assessment Survey

A brief survey was developed and distributed to faculty and staff to determine next steps for support and specific areas of need. Knowing faculty had been inundated by a plethora of resources to assist in the transition to emergency remote teaching, the survey was designed to glean insight into specific faculty experiences and challenges, in an effort to tailor professional development offerings to truly meet faculty needs.

### Convening Faculty and Survey-Based Subgroups

Based on faculty interest and expertise, the decision was made to plan for and host an RLC Pop-In Mini-Conference via Zoom after the spring faculty meeting — just two weeks away. To incite interest and recruit in-house experts beyond the faculty leads as presenters, Pop-Up Meetings were hosted to provide a forum for collaboration and to share the upcoming conference plans. A total of 39 faculty members attended and the mood shared was intentionally one of informality. Feelings of being overwhelmed and bombarded by an increasing number of support tools in their inbox, was a message we heard loud and clear. After the final Pop-Up meeting, survey-based subgroups were formed and topics for the actual Pop-In Conference were clarified.

### Creating a Resource Hub and Collaborative Space

The RLC used our learning management system (LMS) to create a collaborative online space https://drive.google.com/file/d/13wXSIK0Fvcv1nh SqeLojcO9wvwdalpdW/view for faculty to consult during the onset of the crisis and as they shifted their summer courses to emergency remote teaching. RLC members cultivated and curated resources, and the course was distributed to all faculty, granting access for full editing privileges to each member. Thus, the intent of this space was to offer interactive versus passive engagement.

### Offering a Pop-In Mini Conference

At the RLC Pop-In Mini Conference https://drive.google.com/file/d/10_Y9qVnxkjsJrnGvuZxJKhbfx_XYx0Vg/view, participants were

encouraged to pop in and out of sessions based on interest and need. Sessions were held concurrently in twenty-minute bursts for each theme; four sets of sessions with twelve presentations were provided. Presentations were performed and facilitated by RLC members, doctoral students and interested faculty with knowledge of effective, remote teaching practices. While presenters delivered content, session facilitators monitored the chat box to aid participant engagement and understanding. Each session was recorded. Session recordings were embedded in the LMS collaborative online space for viewing and/or revisiting. In addition, participants that were not able to *pop in* were provided an additional opportunity to gain the needed content. (Mini-Conference Flyer template- https://drive.google.com/file/d/1wRoAq4VboaL9JArYZymEgwjl-4m7OiZ9/view)

## Ongoing Community Connections

After the RLC Pop-In Mini-Conference, members of the Remote Learning Community experienced an increase in faculty communications. Participants emailed their appreciation and requested further assistance. STE faculty shared course objectives and offered connections they made to the content presented in the conference; seeking ways to implement the resources immediately to benefit their current students. Not only did emails and text messages continue through the end of the spring semester, but faculty continued communicating to review ideas and learn more tips and technological tricks to apply to future courses. Faculty teaching in the first summer term received requests to audit or shadow their remote teaching efforts from faculty teaching during a later term. Consistent communication surrounding the topic of remote teaching and learning along with application of the content shared at the conference was evident amongst  faculty. This demonstrates a commitment to maintain communication and extend collaborative efforts beyond the initial support structures offered by the RLC.

## EARLY RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

### Survey Results: Topics and Trends

Table 1 demonstrates the top concerns and requests based on the survey results, to which 41 participants responded over a period of 3 days.

**Table 1**

Top 10 Concerns and Requests Indicated by STE Faculty & Staff

| Concerns & Request |
|---|
| 1. Facilitating whole class/small group instruction |
| 2. Incorporating interactive shared documents (ie. Google Docs) |
| 3. Utilizing student responses before/during/following instruction |
| 4. Preparing and voicing over presentations |
| 5. Collaborating and co-teaching with fellow instructors |
| 6. Using manipulatives & available technologies |
| 7. Connecting students & community-building |
| 8. Integrating document cameras and sharing screens |
| 9. Creating group work structures and collaboration |
| 10. Establishing discourse norms during synchronous classes |
| |
| *Source: STE survey administered* |

Emergent themes were subsequently organized into 3 primary strands that spanned the needs of PK-12 faculty and staff including early childhood, elementary, secondary, and exceptional education. The strands identified were: student engagement, resources & tools, and communication & community building (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

Themes and Session Titles for Pop-In Mini-Conference

| Student Engagement | Interactive Google Docs | Student Responses-Padlet/Flipgrid | Digital Escape Rooms | Editing Google Slides During Sessions |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Resources & Tools** | Manipulatives, Doc Cams, & iPads | Big Blue Button & Microsoft Teams | Curriculum Materials Center Connections | TeachLivE™ Applications |
| **Communication & Community Building** | Building Community and Connections | Digital Icebreakers | United Cerebral Palsy Live in the Classroom | Small Group Breakouts & Activities |

## Mini-Conference Results: Attendance and Feedback

The structure of the mini-conference provided the opportunity for participants to pop-in and take advantage of sessions across and/or within strands. Figure 2 represents the participation by faculty, staff and graduate teaching assistants in each session.
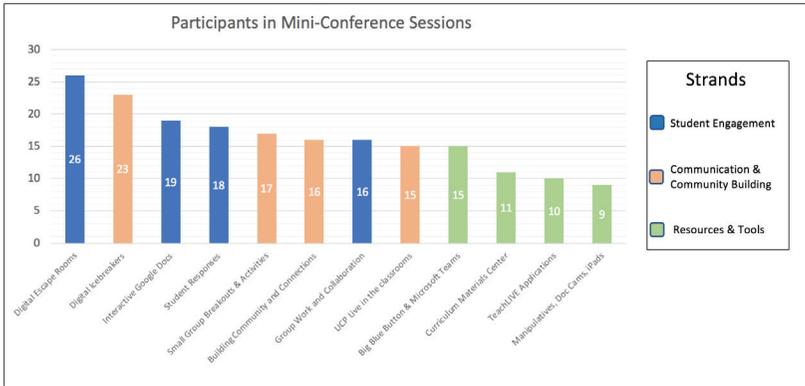


**Figure 2.** Participant Attendance by Session and Strand at Pop-In Mini-Conference.

Participants demonstrated interest and took advantage of the breadth of the strands. The two strands that illustrated the highest number of participants were "Student Engagement" and "Communication & Community Building."

### Table 3
Total Number of Pop-In Mini-Conference Participants by Strand

| Strand | Total Number of Participants |
|---|---|
| Student Engagement | 79 |
| Communication & Community Building | 71 |
| Resources & Tools | 45 |

Based on participation and feedback, emergency remote teaching presented a number of challenges and concerns. Specifically, results indicated:

- Student Engagement remained a critical concern and faculty/staff/instructors sought ways to support student learning. Participants

wanted to learn from/with colleagues about ways to engage students and build upon pedagogies and approaches from face-to-face learning, as well as new approaches in remote learning.
- Community building and classroom discourse in an online format presented a challenge for many. While participants mentioned the use of discussion boards and recordings of student thinking, multiple faculty members sought additional approaches to facilitate effective communication and community building.
- Faculty felt inundated by a plethora of resources and online tools. The discussion at sessions in this strand started with *which* technological tools to use and gravitated towards *how/when* to use each tool intentionally to facilitate teaching and learning.

## IMPLICATIONS

Throughout our efforts, timely, consistent communication helped us maintain relevance and responsiveness, yielding high faculty participation. We intentionally humanized the nature of our efforts, which increased the appeal and authenticity of our work (Ward, Lu, O'Connor, & Overton, 2015). In most cases, the ideas shared could have been learned from polished training videos readily available online; yet, faculty engaged in our professional learning sessions due to a shared valuing of the educational opportunity to connect and learn together. Additionally, faculty - in a supportive, collegial manner - further developed teaching and learning perspectives in conjunction with previous experiential knowledge of teaching and pedagogy related to remote instruction. The aforementioned approaches are consistent with previous research efforts suggesting that collaborative knowledge creation sustained through a sociocultural approach bodes well for inservice education (Kuusisaari, 2014). Faculty engaged in order to position themselves to address and accomplish teaching and research needs during the challenges posed by COVID-19.
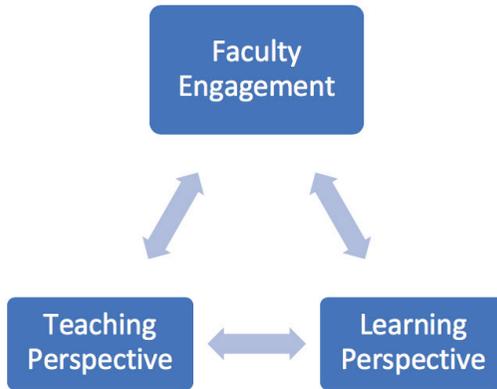
**Figure 3.** Teaching and Learning Perspectives Empowered by RLC Engagement.

    Consistent with longstanding research regarding teacher learning and teachers' individual as well as community learning in collaborative spaces, the RLC designed intentional group learning opportunities (Fishman & Davis, 2006; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolwort, 2001; Meirink, Meijer, & Verloop, 2007; Putnam & Borco, 2000). As lead faculty members of the RLC, an effective workflow was critical in order to expeditiously plan professional development while transitioning and teaching our own courses. Maximizing our use of synchronous online planning tools during meetings and swiftly enacting plans kept the process manageable. From the onset, the need for differentiated professional development was an important consideration (Uerz, Volman, & Kral, 2018). Many faculty had experience teaching remotely in non-emergency settings; however, others had limited exposure and experience. Educators typically do not have sufficient opportunities to gather and reflect deeply on the approaches and practices for developing and implementing curricular goals despite in-service opportunities (Day, 1999; Horn & Little, 2010). Offering professional development for all was simplified by targeting survey-based areas of need. The pop-in nature of our mini-conference, which allowed colleagues to select sessions was also helpful. Upon reflection, we preferred this format over traditional in-person professional development sessions based on participants' ability to gather together and learn about multiple topics during a single conference session. Affordances of meeting virtually enabled faculty with varying schedules includ-

ing academic, professional and family responsibilities to engage in the RLC. Having Zoom meetings also addressed some constraints involving logistics, transportation and childcare needs of the RLC community.

Some of the most critical aspects of the Remote Learning Community efforts related to the implications for preservice and in-service teacher education and professional development including short- and long-term programmatic needs (Horn & Little, 2010). In relation to Phase I (Pre-Internship) of preservice teacher education, participants discussed aspects pertaining to approaches in teaching and engagement opportunities throughout the program starting with content and methods courses onto internships and beyond. Furthermore, RLC members facilitated ways to authenticate mixed mode opportunities to prepare for remote instruction prior to internship and full-time classroom teaching. During these sessions, members also shared intentions to provide additional opportunities for co-teaching for faculty members in order to provide access to multiple professional expertise to students and collaboration among colleagues. Additionally, participants discussed ways to learn from existing research to address issues of equity/access for prospective teaches due to internet, health, and financial concerns (Cochran-Smith et al. 2016; Hill et al., 2017).

The group learning facilitated by the RLC also provided rich opportunities for dialogue related to Phase II (Internship) of preservice teacher education. These discussions entailed potential expansion of diverse internship opportunities within schools and grades (similar to medical rounds). Participants also jointly discussed ways to potentially expand diverse internship opportunities across schools and including urban and rural districts. A common thread across groups related to an intentional shift away from one teacher/one educational setting to a more collaborative approach in planning, implementing, and assessing instructional strategies within and across settings (Hill & Eyers, 2016). These rich discussions are consistent with previous research efforts regarding the role of teacher leadership – individually or collectively – in influencing colleagues and school communities to enhance teaching and learning practices (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Another set of implications from the RLC-led sessions addressed connections to in-service teacher professional development. Specifically, participants discussed ways to share knowledge (including technological insights) shared by teacher candidates and university partners. Several members shared ways to create additional learning opportunities to grow with a multitude of teachers and colleagues. As professional communication serves a key role in teacher education, members addressed strategies to approach potential team chemistry and collaboration issues synchronously as well as

asynchronously with preservice teachers. Lastly, connecting to the intentions and needs of in-service teacher professional development, participants shared ways to enhance the reciprocal exchange of school classroom ideas with university experiences including research to practice efforts to address student needs and learning (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolwort, 2001; Putnam & Borco, 2000).

Upon reflection, we also recognized that our efforts to provide professional development through the RLC offered significant professional learning opportunities for us, which was an unintended, but highly valued outcome of the work. Further, collaborative experiences, such as co-teaching and co-planning synchronous class meetings, enabled us to have new, rich conversations about our teacher preparation efforts and pedagogical practices. In fact, we suspect that many of our learning outcomes will drive improvements to our teacher preparation programs moving forward as we reprioritize faculty collaboration, co-construct course experiences, and identify new competencies for remote teaching (and emergency remote learning) that we want to demonstrate for and develop among our teacher candidates.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research can potentially extend previous efforts that have described and begun to express the nature of educational interruptions both within and beyond the United States (Kurtz, 2019; Jotia, Biraimah, & Kurtz, 2020). Initial considerations would need to include taking into account local access/equity issues, the role of policies and institutions influential in addressing teaching during these times (Cochran-Smith et al. 2016; Hill et al., 2017). The unforeseen events of COVID-19 present a variety of future research opportunities linked to the process and implications experienced by the Remote Learning Community connected to collaborative school improvement (Chapman & Muijs, 2014). Next steps in research could examine and explore sustainability of RLC's through an iterative analysis, including surveying faculty to determine continuing professional development needs. In addition, the challenges and demands on faculty could be linked and contribute to faculty burnout and perhaps even institutional effectiveness. The immediacy of the impact of the virus caused both academic and emotional trauma. Faculty endured significant shifts in their work/life balance, which merits future research. As events unfold, additional research implications will become increasingly evident and warrant further analysis.

## References

Borthwick, A. C., & Hansen, R. (2017). Digital literacy in teacher education. Are teacher educators competent? *Journal of Digital Learning in Teacher Education, 33*(2), 46-48. https://doi.org/10.1080/21532974.2017.1291249

Chapman, C., & Muijs, D. (2014). Does school-to-school collaboration promote school improvement? A study of the impact of school federations on student outcomes. *School effectiveness and school improvement*, *25*(3), 351-393.

Cochran-Smith, M., Ell, F., Grudnoff, L., Haigh, M., Hill, M. F., & Ludlow, L. (2016). Initial teacher education: What does it take to put equity at the centre? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 57, 67–78.

Day, C. (1999). Developing teachers: The challenges of lifelong learning. London: Falmer Press.

Fishman, B.J., & Davis, E.A. (2006). Teacher learning research and the learning sciences. In R.K. Sawyer (Ed.), The Cambridge handbook of the learning sciences (pp. 535–550). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grossman, P., Wineburg, S., & Woolwort, S. (2001). Toward a theory of teacher community. *Teachers College Record*, 103(6), 942–1012.

Hill, M. F., Ell, F., Grudnoff, L., Haigh, M., Cochran-Smith, M., Chang, W. C., & Ludlow, L. (2017). Assessment for equity: Learning how to use evidence to scaffold learning and improve teaching. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, *24*(2), 185-204.

Hill, M. F., & Eyers, G. (2016). Moving from student to teacher: Changing perspectives about assessment through teacher education. In G. T. L. Brown & L. Harris (Eds.), Handbook of the human and social factors of assessment (pp. 57–76). New York, NY: Routledge.

Horn, I. S., & Little, J. W. (2010). Attending to problems of practice: Routines and resources for professional learning in teachers' workplace interactions. *American educational research journal*, *47*(1), 181-217.

Johnson, T., Wisniewski, M. A., Kuhlemeyer, G., Isaacs, G., & Krzykowski, J. (2012). Technology adoption in higher education: Overcoming anxiety through faculty bootcamp. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 16*(2), 63-72.

Jotia, A. L., Biraimah, K. L., & Kurtz, B. A. (2020). Transformative study abroad programs in emerging nations: Moving toward equitable Global North-South partnerships. Theory Into Practice, 1-10.

Kuusisaari, H. (2014). Teachers at the zone of proximal development – Collaboration promoting or hindering the development process. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 43, 46–57.

Kurtz, B. (2019). The AfterMath: A Culturally Responsive Mathematical Intervention to Aid Students Affected by Natural Disasters.[Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Central Florida

Lederman, D. (2020, March 18). Will shift to remote teaching be boon or bane for online learning? *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from

https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2020/03/18/most-teaching-going-remote-will-help-or-hurt-online-learning

Meirink, J.A., Meijer, P.C., & Verloop, N. (2007). A closer look at teachers' individual learning in collaborative settings. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 13(2), 145–164.

Milman, N. (2020, March 30). This is emergency remote teaching, not just online teaching. *Education Week.* Retrieved from https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/03/30/this-is-Emergency-remote-teaching-not-just.html

Parrish, A. H. & Sadera, W. A. (2019). A review of faculty development models that build teacher educators' technology competencies. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education, 27*(4), 437-464.

Putnam, R.T., & Borco, H. (2000). What do new views of knowledge and thinking have to say about research on teacher learning? *Educational Researcher*, 29(1), 4–15.

Uerz, D., Volman, M., & Kral, M. (2018). Teacher educators' competences in fostering student teachers' proficiency in teaching and learning with technology: An overview of relevant research literature. Teaching and Teacher Education, 75, 12-23. Retrieved from: https://www.scienced irect.com/science/article/pii/S0742051X17304936?via%3Dihub

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology. (2016). *Advancing educational technology in teacher preparation: Policy brief*. Retrieved from https://tech.ed.gov/teacherprep

Ward, H. C., Lu, M. P., O'Connor, B. H., & Overton, T. (2015). Successful bottom-up faculty collaboration during institutional change. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Ed,* 7(2), 308-330. https://doi.org/0.1108/JAR-HE-11-2013-0048

York-Barr, J., & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of educational research*, *74*(3), 255-316.

## APPENDIX A

Faculty Survey (administered via Qualtrics)

1. What are the things that STE and this group can do to support you during this
   sojourn into online/distance learning?
2. What are some of your successes facilitating online learning?
3. What are some of your bloopers facilitating online learning?
4. This survey is anonymous, but if you'd like us to contact you, please enter your name and email address below.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1FDXCeY7XyNegAwEPduO9rlXIZv-cUJl6/view